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ABSTRACT

A recent review of literature on local school-board roles in decision making found only two research studies that examined the actions and decisions of board members. This paper presents findings of a study, commissioned by the West Virginia School Boards Association (WVSBA) and funded by the West Virginia legislature, that examined the kinds of decisions and actions taken during regular meetings of local school boards in the state between August 1990 and August 1995. A previous study examined school-board decision making for the period 1985-90. Data were obtained from analysis of the minutes of 55 local school-board meetings. Findings show that boards most frequently addressed the issue of personnel decisions (almost 23 percent of the total decisions), followed by financial decisions (almost 21 percent). In light of the findings, the following recommendations are offered: (1) School boards and district administrators need to engage in more and better long- and short-term planning; (2) boards may need to provide more opportunities for community members to address the board; (3) boards should consider establishing a review process during regular work sessions; and (4) boards using the consent agenda should exchange information with those boards not using it. Two figures are included. (LMI)

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An Analysis of the Actions and Decisions Made in West Virginia School Board Meetings, August 1990 through August 1995

Final Report Presented to the West Virginia School Boards Association

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An Analysis of the Actions and Decisions Made in West Virginia Local School Board Meetings, August 1990 through August 1995

Purpose of the Study

This study, commissioned by the West Virginia School Boards Association (WVSBA) and funded by the West Virginia Legislature, was designed to examine the kinds of decisions and actions taken during regular meetings of local school boards in West Virginia between August, 1990 and August, 1995. It should be noted that this is a study of the decisions reported in minutes of school board meetings rather than an analysis of the amount of time spent by boards in making decisions of any kind. This study is a replication of a study of the actions and decisions made by local school boards in regular meetings between 1985 and 1990 that was conducted by the same researchers for the WVSBA in 1990. The following description of the methodology and findings of the study was prepared for presentation to the WVSBA Training Standards and Review Committee. The findings and the recommendations that follow may point to areas of needed training and/or changes in practice for local school boards. A review of the literature, specifically research studies, was undertaken to determine if studies in any state had been undertaken relating to school board decisionmaking.

Review of Related Research

In a review of recent literature related to local school board roles and functions in decisionmaking, only two research studies that examined the actions and decisions of board members were identified. Newman and B[illegible]s (1992) conducted a survey to determine perceptions of board members from 208 districts in six states regarding the amount of conflict in board decisionmaking, the presence of voting blocks on the board, and five other attributes of decisionmaking including the involvement of community, the board's search for solutions through discussion, the influence of an individual board member, the use of majority voting for decision making and the use of the superintendent's input. Three common patterns of decisionmaking based upon group conflict and ability to reach consensus were identified--bipolar, unipolar, and open. The study concluded that most boards were unipolar, operating without opposing blocs and with frequent unanimous decisions. This study may have implications for the further analysis of the number and types of decisions reached by school boards in the West Virginia study and/or of the increasing tendency for West Virginia boards to go into executive session. However, conclusions of the Newman and Brown study are based upon board member perceptual data, as opposed to document review of the record of board decisionmaking--the minutes of regular meetings.

Steck in a 1994 qualitative study examined factors supporting education changes in an urban school district by studying local school board members through board meeting observations, interviews with board members and others, and analysis of central office communications, state reports, and instructional audits. The case study approach of the study does much to describe the facilitating behaviors of the school board in a district focused on

change and school reform. However, the methods used promoted an in-depth study of the motives for actions without enumerating the actions and decisions both related and unrelated to the change process of the board during the period of investigation. While it can advise those boards seeking to advance school reform, it has less to say about the commonplace decisionmaking of school boards in regular sessions. No additional research studies were identified that pertain to the day-to-day decisionmaking of local school boards.

Methodology

Researchers, Jane E. Hange, Ph.D., of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory and Paul A. Leary, Ed.D. of the West Virginia Graduate College, used a qualitative research design consisting of emergent category analysis of the minutes of local school boards to identify commonalities in decisions made and actions taken during regular sessions. This study replicated the procedures used in the 1990 study as described below.

The replication study investigated regular school board minutes from August 1990 and August 1995, a period of study that begins at the conclusion of WVSBA's first study of school board minutes and concludes following a similar, five-year period of study. The total minimum number of regular board meetings, therefore meeting minutes, possible for all 55 local school boards for this period was calculated to be 3300 (N=3300). To replicate the original study, researchers determined that a random sample of the minutes of two meetings provided by each school board (n=110) would be sufficient to determine common actions and decisions of West Virginia school boards for the period.

The West Virginia School Boards Association Executive Director Howard O'Cull sent a letter to the 55 district school superintendents introducing the study and requesting their cooperation in providing a set of minutes for one regular school board meeting held in each of the two months specified (months assigned randomly to each local school board). A copy of the letter to the superintendent was sent simultaneously to the chairperson of the local school board. Superintendents were asked to provide the minutes to the WVSBA since they traditionally have responsibility for maintaining these files. All 55 school superintendents provided minutes for two regular school board meeting as requested. There were four exceptions to the minutes requested--two boards did not hold regular meetings in one of the months requested and provided only one set of minutes and two boards provided minutes of one meeting that was not requested instead of a requested set. Many districts provided all meeting information sheets.

In order to conduct a valid study of emergent categories and not categories established a priori, the researchers did not use the categories from the earlier study but, instead did a preliminary analysis of several minutes to identify emergent categories. Each researcher then conducted an analysis of 1/2 of the collection of minutes to establish consensus on conceptions of categories and interrater reliability. Following discussion of any discrepancies, resolution of category constructs, each researcher used the 11 emergent categories to classify the actions and decision described in 1/2 of the minutes then checked the categories assigned by the other

researcher on the second 1/2 of the data set of 108 minutes. Researchers then summarized major findings and developed recommendations based upon their analysis of the minutes of the 108 meetings. The major findings and recommendations are discussed below.

Major Findings

A total of 2134 decisions or actions were categorized, an increase of 415 or 24% over the number noted in the earlier study. Found decisions were found to most often address the following 11 issues: personnel, finance, presentations to the board, permissions, policy development and oversight, executive sessions, students, awards/recognitions, interagency agreements, textbooks/curriculum, and legal issues. Other issues infrequently mentioned were grouped in an "other" category. Decisions and actions that involved routine board operation, specifically approval of board meeting minutes or setting of next meeting dates were not analyzed. Discussion was frequently noted in the minutes but was also not analyzed since no action was taken nor decision reached. The 11 established categories of decisions and actions, frequencies of these and component decisions or actions and percentages of total decisions and actions that each category represents are provided as figure 1. A listing of decisions and actions in the "other" category are provided as figure 2.

While the emergent category analysis method permitted the surfacing of new categories of decisions and actions, only one category was added--interagency agreements. Decisions in this category most often addressed cooperation between the school district and a college/university or social service agency to share facilities and/or programs. With increased emphasis from the state government on collaboration among agencies as well as consolidation of school facilities, new space has been made available in older schools that can be used for social service programs. Declining enrollments means fewer funds passing from state government to school districts so increased revenues from expanding colleges and universities may also provide rationale for the increased number of interagency agreements. The national movement toward addressing the needs of students through assistance to their families may also contribute to the increased collaboration and/or communication apparent in the number of decisions in this area.

Other differences in the numbers and types of actions and decisions categorized include an increase in the number of personnel decisions; a category that moved in ranking from second to first in frequency of decisions. Although researchers noted that more school boards were using the consent agenda method of approving personnel recommendations made by the superintendent in which one decision is made for all persons named on a list of personnel actions, the total number of actions and decisions in this category increased from 316 to 479, an increase of 34%. However, personnel decisions and actions increased in the percentage of total decisions from 18.5% to 22.6%. One difference noted by researchers that may explain the increase was the approval by school boards of school volunteers such as field trip chaperons and unpaid school aides, a practice not noted in minutes analyzed for the previous study. The majority of personnel decisions continued to refer to hirings and transfers as well as supplemental contracts and retirements or resignations. The lack of a major increase in

terminations would indicate that the reduction in force decisions that accompany consolidation of schools within districts may not have been made. Many educators effected by closing of their schools may have been included on transfer lists for board approval.

Finance decisions and actions accounted for 20.9 % of the total (f=443), a second place ranking among all decisional categories. While expenditure decisions increased to nearly half of all budget actions (47.6%), budget supplements/transfers remained high (f=116, 26.2%). This may indicate a need for improved planning on the part of school boards since these actions represented a nearly monthly reallocation of funds from one category to another. Buildings and capital improvement decisions totalled 116 (26.2% of finance decisions), relatively unchanged from the previous study (f=118, 30% of finance decisions), although district involvement in consolidation and new construction financed in part by the West Virginia School Building Authority increased between 1991 and 1995.

Since both actions and decisions were noted by the researchers in both studies, presentations to the board by staff and by the public were categorized although the board may not have acted upon the information presented. School boards received much of their information in presentations to the board made by staff, especially by the school superintendent. The number of presentations to the boards increased to 396 or 18.6% of the total actions/decisions compared with 207 or 12.1% in the previous study; an increase of 52 %, moving this category from fourth to third position in the rankings by frequency. While staff presentations increased, so did those made by the public, more than doubling from 47 in 1985-1990 to 99 in 1990-1995.

Permissions given by school boards declined slightly from 213 (12.5% of total) to 196 (9.2 % of total). This decline, especially the decrease in professional development permissions from 59 to 35, may be explained in part by an increased focus on school-based decisionmaking which reduces the need to seek board approval for expenditure when the control of funds for this category is passed to schools.

The percentage of school board actions and decisions relating to policy development and oversight increased by 126% between the two periods of study. Meeting minutes between August 1990 and August 1995 indicated that boards made a total of 113 decisions (5.3% of total) relating to creation of new policies or review of existing policies compared with only 50 decisions (3% of total) between July 1985 and July 1990. Preliminary content analysis of these decisions showed that many related to drugfree schools, Local School Improvement Councils, and safe schools--areas in which policy development has been mandated by the West Virginia Legislature and/or the Department of Education. When ranked against other categories, the frequency of actions and decisions regarding policy development and oversight moved this category from eighth to fifth position.

School boards are more frequently adjourning to executive session during regular meetings as indicated by an increase from 71 (4% of total) noted in the previous study to 110 (5.1% of total) in this study. Personnel questions were most often cited as the reason for moving into closed session, but the subcategory of litigation was also cited as was land. However, school

boards continued to adjourn to executive session without noting in the minutes the reason for the session (30 occasions or 27.3% of the total) as required by law. Decisions made by boards following their return to regular session from executive session, frequently indicated that student disciplinary action, most often expulsion, may have been the topic of discussion. This trend may be related to recent state legislation on school safety.

Decisions in the above categories comprise approximately 59% of all decisions and actions reported in the 1990-1995 study. Very few changes in the frequency and percentages of actions and decisions were noted in the remaining categories of students (primarily transfers within and out of districts or expulsions), awards/recognitions, textbooks, and legal issues. The new emergent category of interagency agreements, described above, ranked ninth in frequency among the 11 categories. The number of actions and decisions coded as "other" decreased from 215 (13% of total) in the previous study to 82 (3.8% of total) in this study, perhaps substantiating the need for the interagency agreement category.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered based upon the major findings of this study and further analysis of the 108 minutes from West Virginia's 55 school boards during the period August 1990-August 1995.

- The frequency of budget transfer and supplement decisions may indicate that school boards and district administrators need to engage in more and better long- and short-term planning. Training in fiscal management, budgeting, and strategic planning may be needed by many school boards across the state. No differences between large and small districts in the frequency of use of budget transfers and supplements were noted.

- While the number of presentations to school boards by members of the public had increased, the percentage of these public presentations was still only one-quarter of that made by staff members. Boards may need to provide additional opportunities to community members to address the board with petitions for action as well as comments on decisions. The number of presentations by the public averaged less than one per meeting. While many boards heard presentations from Local School Improvement Councils during regular sessions, most frequently these were given by teachers or administrators rather than parent or community representatives. In addition to providing special meetings with LSICs as required by state law, boards may also want to encourage more regular meeting dialogue with these groups that focus on school improvement and provide valuable links to community opinion.

- West Virginia school boards increased in the number and percentage of actions and decisions relating to policy making and oversight between 1985 and 1995. However, this category of decisionmaking accounted for only 5.3% of all actions and decisions.

Since the local school board is the only policy making governance structure in the district, boards should consider establishing a regular review process during regular work sessions in which sections of district policies and their related administrative guidelines or regulations may be reviewed and amendments begun. District administrators could facilitate this process by working with the board to establish a calendar of policy reviews by topic (budget, personnel, transportation, curriculum, federal programs, special education, affirmative action, etc.) and by providing copies of all related policies and regulations in advance of meetings in which they will be reviewed. Announcing to staff and the public the board's intent to review specific policies and regulations also provides opportunity for comment at regular sessions. Coupled with assistance in policy development, enforcement, and feedback to the board on the part of district administration, this oversight function can help boards to be better informed. Additional training for school boards with their superintendents and/or key central office staff may be useful.

- Although researchers noted the increased use of the consent agenda that assists boards in reviewing decisional areas with many components such as personnel decisions, expenditure approvals, field trip requests, etc., many local school boards are still voting on each person hired, each bill paid, or each bus request approved. Training and/or exchange of information (*e.g.* conference calls or visits) between boards practicing consent agendas and those not yet adopting this time-saving practice is encouraged.

- Future research on the actions of local school boards is recommended. In addition to replications of this study in West Virginia every five years to determine changes in board actions and types of decisions, the researchers recommend an examination of the time that boards spend in discussion of these types of decisions to further clarify board behaviors and future training needs. Further studies could include a content analysis of the discussion topics in regular meetings, not included in this study since discussion is often not reported in minutes when boards do not take subsequent action. Audiotapes or videotapes of regular sessions could be used to further this research. Studies of this type could reveal if boards deliberate longer on curriculum and instructional issues than indicated by the frequency of their decisions. Additional study of special board meetings such as those with Local School Improvement Councils and faculty senates could describe the relationships among these governance bodies, identify effective models, and reveal the need for training in communications and/or decisionmaking on the part of any or all groups.

Finally, the researchers recommend that this study of the actions and decisions of local school boards in West Virginia be replicated in other states to identify differences among school boards by state or by board characteristics, to formulate a model of local school board decisionmaking across states, to analyze the effects of differences in state legislation on board operations, and to reveal training and technical assistance needs that, if addressed, could lead to improve board decisionmaking.

References

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1)	Personnel		479	(22.6%)
2)	Finance			
	a) Budget Supplements/Transfers	(26.2%)	116	
	b) Expenditures	(47.6%)	211	
	c) Buildings/Capital Improvements	(26.2%)	116	
		Total	443	(20.9%)
3)	Presentations To The Board			
	a) Staff		297	(75%)
	b) Public		99	(25%)
		Total	396	(18.6%)
4)	Permissions			
	a) Field Trips	(30.1%)	59	
	b) Faculty Use/Bus Use	(36.2%)	71	
	c) Professional Development	(17.9%)	35	
	d) Other	(15.8%)	31	
		Total	196	(9.2%)
5)	Policy Development/Oversight/Approval	Total	113	(5.3%)
6)	Executive Sessions			
	a) Personnel	(61.8%)	68	
	b) Litigation	(3.6%)	4	
	c) Land	(7.2%)	8	
	d) No Reason/Other	(27.3%)	30	
		Total	110	(5.1%)
7)	Students	Total	109	(5.1%)
8)	Awards/Recognitions	Total	81	(3.8%)
9)	Interagency Agreements	Total	54	(2.5%)
10)	Textbooks	Total	45	(2.1%)
11)	Legal	Total	16	(1%)
12)	Other	Total	82	(3.8%)
		Grand Total	2124	

Figure 1. Frequency and Percentage of Total of Local School Board Decisions

Figure 2

Category 12-Other Actions and Decisions

Ranked by Frequency From Most Often Mentioned (#1) to Least Often Mentioned (#13)

1. Appointments to Boards (RESA, Library)
2. Approval of School Calendar Changes
3. Electing School Board Officers
4. Approval of Staff Development Plans
5. Approval of Resolutions/Proclamations
6. Approval of a Step 7 Plan
7. Approval of Waivers
8. Setting Levy Rates
9. Naming Surrogate Parents
10. Certifying Bond/Levy Elections
11. Setting Graduation Dates
12. Granting Easements/Rights of Way
13. Naming a New School/Stadium